

DONALD BRITTAIN -- A PASSIONATE IRONY

booklet for inclusion in the boxed DVD set.

Ronald Blumer 20,000 words (approximately 40 pages with illustrations)

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cover page

If I had to choose between feature films and documentary, I would choose documentary. It may be an ego thing because good documentaries are going to have a longer shelf-life than most feature films. That is if someone manages to preserve them... Donald Brittain (Cinema Canada January, 1986)

DONALD BRITTAIN: THE MAN

A Eulogy For Donald Brittain by William Weintraub

How fortunate we are to have known Donald Brittain. How unfortunate we are not to have him with us a while longer. But if his life was too short, it was still a life fulfilled, a life abundant. And it was long enough for him to create a legacy that is beyond compare.

MEMORANDUM...BETHUNE...VOLCANO...THE CHAMPIONS... The list is astonishingly long: And in his house, up on Clarke Avenue, the shelf groans under the weight of the Etrogs, the Genies, the Emmys, the Nellies -- a little forest of statuettes with odd names. And on the walls, more awards and certificates and parchments from Edinburgh, Venice, Sydney, Leipzig, New York, Sofia, San Francisco. This recognition was for films that resound with intimations of immortality. People will want to see them decades from now, even centuries from now. They will be remembered.

But today, on this occasion, I think our memories are more of the man than of his work. And what an extraordinary man was Donald Brittain! Wise, compassionate, complicated, exasperating, funny, melancholy, irritating, contrary, surprising, endlessly entertaining, brilliant, generous-and beloved by such a legion of friends and colleagues. But above all-extraordinary. Donald seemed incapable of doing anything in an ordinary way. He was not striving for effect, it was just that he had never mastered the ordinary way. For him, the shortest distance between two points could never be a straight line, a boring line. His clothes, for instance. Can't you see him now, shuffling down those forbidding corridors of the film Board in that resplendent brown baseball jacket? The corrugated trousers are clinging desperately to the hipbones. People are following him. Are they anxious to see if the uncertain suspension of the trousers Donald will finally collapse? No, they are following him because they want to talk to him. Everybody wanted to talk to Don.

His clothes. Do you remember those strange, shirt-like garments he used to wear in the seventies? What would you call them? Abbreviated caftans? Mu-mus? He had them made for him by some little old dressmaker. They weren't exactly fashion, but by George they had style. Donald always had style, in every thing he did. That fact started dawning on us one day in 1963, in Theatre Six, when we watched the cutting copy of a film called *FIELDS OF SACRIFICE*. Donald had arrived at the Film Board, at the old sawmill on John Street, in Ottawa, nine years earlier. He was an unemployed journalist who thought he might try his hand at writing for films.

In the years that followed, he learned his craft and paid his dues, making all those solemnly useful films like *SURVIVAL IN THE ARCTIC* and *SETTING FIRES FOR SCIENCE*. Now they'd sent him to Europe to make a film about the graves of Canadian soldiers who had died in two wars. It was another useful film, another film that nobody else wanted to make. But Donald astonished us. He came back with a masterpiece. His first masterpiece. Up until then, old Don had been just one of the boys working hard, making good films and telling lies in the tavern. But now we began to suspect that we had a poet in our midst. But of course we were too polite to, tell him that.

How the man could write! Is there any one of us who can't hear that voice right now?... The cadence, the drone, the rasp, the music, the words. The words. What writer has not envied the way he could find that word, that precisely right word, the word that would stab, that would chill, that would glow in the dark. He would sit at that ramshackle typewriter at three o'clock in the morning, enveloped in a miasma of cigarette smoke, waiting for the word. And it would come to him What a gift! What talent! What discipline!

As we all know, the words were so very important to his films. It was the words that led an American critic to write that "Donald Brittain purges the documentary of its usual sluggishness and timidity." Don refused to let anything he was ever involved in be boring. And nowhere was this more evident than at the poker table. The most dramatic hands were surely those where old Don had a lot at stake. He could take an astonishingly long time making up his mind whether he should bet or fold. And he would mutter away at length, making us privy to the convoluted thought processes that he was bringing to bear on his dilemma. It could be highly irritating. But how we're going to miss that divine irritation! How diminished that poker table is going to be, from now on -- if we ever have the heart to resume it.

Don was fascinated by time. Getting into his car one day, he clicked on his stopwatch. Why? He was driving to the Film Board via the Côte des Neiges route and he had to know exactly how long it would take. Yesterday he had taken the Victoria Avenue route and he had timed that. In fact he had been timing the two routes all week.

But mind you, we still arrived at the Film Board an hour late for his appointment. Why? We had been detained on Clarke Avenue for the completion of a task. Donald had produced a list of all the production people at the Film Board and we had to assign a military rank to each person. Which cameraman was a captain, which gaffer was a sergeant, which administrator was a major, who were the colonels and who were the brigadiers. It was important for Donald to have things like that worked out with precision.

Life was an endless game for Donald, but he was not a frivolous man. His films were laced with humor and irony, but they were very serious films. They were concerned with the fate of the planet, with the abuse of power, with the folly and corruption of politics, with genocide, with the abuse of the weak by the strong.

And his films were concerned with Canada, the country he loved so much, the country that exasperated him so much, the country he always came back to. As much as any man, Donald Brittain held up a mirror, so his country could see itself-its truth, its beauty, its pettiness, its glory.

Don always chose the path of risk. It was part of his inability to settle for the obvious. His working methods were also those of greatest risk. Deadlines loomed, and little seemed to be getting done. Fear would start to invade the cutting room. But Don would reassure his colleagues. "I function best," he once said, "in an advanced state of panic."

Brutally long hours, weekends, vacations postponed-but his colleagues loved it, and they came back for more. Because if Donald worked them like slaves, he himself was the hardest-working of them all.

He respected his crews, he genuinely wanted their suggestions and criticisms, he gave them generous credit for everything they did. Everybody wanted to work with Don Brittain. There was so much he could teach you. And, above all, it was such great, agonizing fun. What loyalty he inspired! And what loyalty he gave back in return!

Don Brittain's talent came to fruition in that dumb and dreary decade called the sixties, when so many of our young filmmakers were ideologues, always ready to jump onto the next trendy bandwagon. The bandwagon is always the refuge of the untalented. But Donald was different. His films were about people, not slogans. As one critic said, "He makes the common person great, the famous person common."

He made films about many famous people, and I wonder what kind of a film he would have made about Donald Code Brittain. There would probably have been too much horse-racing in it for my own taste. There might even have been some documentary ambiguity in it, to make it appear that the expensive horse Don once bought had won more than that one solitary race.

The Ottawa Rough Riders would have been it in, with their greatest fan, Don Brittain, cheering them on, perhaps because they were the losingest team in human history. And there would have been the young Don making a brilliant play in the touch football game behind the Film Board. And Don as the captain of a basketball team called The Sprockets, playing illegally on the NFB soundstage.

There would have been lots of golf in this award-winning epic. A young actor, fresh-faced and bright-eyed, would have the role of teen-age Don, playing with his father at the Royal Ottawa Golf Club. And there would be yesterday's Don, played by himself, playing on the Dunany course, up in Lachute, with his son, Christopher. And here we would see documentary truth, with Christopher patiently showing his father how to do it. "Just relax, Dad, and swing easy." And Don would show himself in close-up, smiling and proud that he could learn from his son. And proud that he could learn from his beloved daughter, Jennifer, who knows a lot about horses, and about Canada.

And there would be his wife, Brigitta, pillar of strength, shelter in the storm, rescuer from the chaos that he loved to create beloved centre of his life.

Brigitta, Christopher, Jennifer-there would be a lot of good stuff about them, in that film. And there would be cleverly cut, cameo appearances by a lot of his friends. He'd be down there in the Film Board basement, in the pit, at four in the morning, hunched over the Steenbeck, enveloped in a cloud of smoke, trying to crowd as many as possible into that film that he ought to have made.

For the narration he might well have again used those lines of Norman Bethune's:

*An artist enters eagerly into the life of man, of all men.
He becomes all men in himself.
The function of the artist is to disturb.
His duty is to arouse the sleeper, to shake the complacent pillars of the world.
He reminds the world of its dark ancestry, shows the world its present, and points the way to its
new birth.
He makes uneasy the static, the set and the still.*

The Globe and Mail (Canada)

September 6, 1986 Saturday

The Battles of Brittain

BYLINE: RICK GROEN

CHERRY Kiss is a funny-looking 3-year-old, a grey filly boasting ears that would fetch an envious rise from Mr. Ed. Donald Brittain is a rumpled 58-year-old, a skilled director sporting the baggiest of corduroys and the keenest of wits. Brittain is a lifelong follower of the horses. Alas, so is Miss Kiss. Apparently, when they met at a recent claiming function, it was a clear case of love at first sight. So he became a rookie owner, and she stayed a veteran loser. Yet, on race morning at Toronto's Woodbine track, all things are possible.

A province away, in a Montreal house atop the steepest hill in Westmount, a shelf of awards tells part of the story. There, above a glassed-in bookcase with a broken pane, a flock of golden statuettes from glittering festivals - among them, plump Nellies and proud Genies - testifies that Brittain is a filmmaker of the top rank. Further evidence comes from director Norman Jewison, a fellow Canadian who followed another road to a different glory: "Donald Brittain has taken the documentary format into a dramatic structure that somehow relates to our time."

The best of those documentaries - made over the course of a three-decade association with the National Film Board - are commanding in style and eclectic in scope, ranging from the horrors of the Holocaust (Memorandum) to the tribulations of the motor car (Henry Ford's America), from the visibly powerful (Roy Thomson in Never A Backward Step) to the pathetically talented (Volcano: An Inquiry Into The Life And Death of Malcolm Lowry) to the frustratingly faceless (Paperland: The Bureaucrat Observed). Happily, his celebrated skills show no sign of erosion. Canada's Sweetheart, last year's searing portrait of union leader Hal Banks, left an international jury at Toronto's Festival of Festivals in spellbound admiration. Their collective verdict said it all and said it simply: "This is a great work."

So diverse in content, each of these films shares a distinctive stamp - a human (and humanizing) quality that deflates the mighty and celebrates the minute, a communion of words and pictures that is simultaneously detached yet passionate, ironic yet involved. But if the style is paradoxical, the tone is consistent - richly elegiac, almost Faulknerian. Or as broadcaster Patrick Watson poetically puts it: "When his humanity comes into focus, he can shoot into the heart an arrow that the great wits never know - an arrow that appears to fly not from himself but from his subjects."

Undeniably, Brittain brings to his craft an instinctively deep understanding of the human heart in

conflict with itself. With good reason, given a self-assessment delivered only half in jest: "I'm a socialist, a royalist and an Ottawa Rough Rider fan." Within the man, no less than his work, defensible tradition and empty convention wage their perpetual battle, all presided over by this inveterate jock with a playful turn of mind.

At the top of the top, in a second-floor anteroom that serves as Brittain's tiny office, stands a tidy symbol of this psychic congestion: a clay bust of the long-dead Edward VII adorned with a baseball cap from the long-defunct St. Louis Browns. And so we have it - the need to revere competing with the urge to debunk.

Yet these schisms seem bred in the bone. Hailing from "a minor establishment family in Ottawa," he can point to a long line of United Empire Loyalists on his father's side and Huguenots on his mother's: "I've even got a Huron Indian princess somewhere in there. I'm a perfectly bred Canadian. But, of course, some perfectly bred Canadians don't run very well."

Cherry Kiss has not been running very well. With the race still hours away, Brittain is pacing before her stall like a nervous papa on talent night. Trainer Mike Tammaro, a Runyonesque heavyweight who mixes a thick Maryland accent with a cautious Northern manner, is waxing pessimistic: "If she runs good, she can run with them horses, but maybe she chokes herself off. The rider told me she was chicken-s---." Papa looks worried, then turns seven shades of glum when Tammaro whispers the dreaded word: "Detroit." Oh no, Nag City, a shady circuit long on drugs and short on talent. Among the horsey set, it's a step away from dog food, the equine equivalent of getting sent down from the Blue Jays to the Argyle Sox. In her narrow cubicle, those donkey's ears standing at erect attention, Cherry Kiss shuffles.

"I did a lot of drinking. There was a period when I wasn't too sober for a couple of years. I mean, I've been drinking all my life, but I was doing a bad job then." Then was the early seventies, after Brittain had left behind a staff position at the NFB and a trail of early achievements (including *Memorandum* and *Bethune*). Essentially, this was a mid-life crisis in a career that began more by accident than design. Indeed, Brittain's first love was - and to a large extent, still is - the written word, which he practiced at the *Ottawa Journal* immediately upon leaving Queen's University. Three years later (1954), he strayed to the Film Board and an ill-defined job as a "trainee" writer: "I was sort of bemused by it. I really thought I'd go back into print."

But bemusement slowly evolved into commitment, into a developed skill and a consuming passion. Then came his declaration of independence in 1968, followed by a darker evolution, that free fall from sobriety. Yet he would pull out of the dive to create a unique freelance relationship with both the NFB and the CBC, who have since filled the role of co-producers on his major endeavors. That autonomous base gave rise to another extended burst of creativity - large-scale, well-crafted works (*Henry Ford*, *The Champions*, *Paperland*, *On Guard For Thee*) all made at the

Board and showcased on the public network.

Absolute freedom, a national forum, it was - and remains – a documentarian's dream. But, restless again ("Things were getting too easy. It was all so slick"), he ventured into drama, directing a few agit- prop scenarios on the CBC's For The Record series ("It was like going to the office"). En route, Brittain continued to chase the elusive goal of a feature film, a pursuit he calls "a wish, not an obsession." Nevertheless, when that wish went down the well once too often, he again plunged deep into the slough of despond. Losing the Grey Fox project to Philip Borsos -the result of some internal confusion at Telefilm - drove the final nail into his emotional coffin: "I was as down as a snake's belly. I'd blown a great opportunity and was at the point where I said, 'I'm a has-been.' For once, my confidence was shook. But then the Banks thing came along and I threw myself into it, saying I gotta take on something that was new, different and tough."

The "Banks thing" - the multi-award-winning Canada's Sweetheart -proved to be a revivifying triumph, a splendidly cast and superbly structured piece that whisked the hyphen right out of the docu-drama. For the legions who had lost faith in this hybrid genre, Banks was a major aesthetic breakthrough, an artistic achievement without an intellectual price, without an iota of compromise on a crucial theme that has dominated much of Brittain's work.

"I wasn't interested in Hal Banks, I was interested in the collusion of the Canadian Government. I used to think of Canadians as being extremely superior to Americans, particularly during the McCarthy period. But as I reached some degree of maturity, I realized there was an enormous amount of hypocrisy in this country, a smugness and complacency. Peace, order and good government is not exactly a ringing clarion call to the good life. It's a protective, narrow definition which is essentially extremely selfish. And this is the sort of thing that gets my juices flowing, that I like to go after."

Still, Brittain firmly declines the crusader's cape: "I don't think you can make them any different, but you've gotta stay on the attack in terms of the establishment. And it's tough to do here, because it's so easy to become a part of the establishment, it's natural for someone of my age in my position. Yet I have an antipathy to anything that smacks of absorption. I guess I'm a double agent, a mole. Somewhere, you have to sustain a certain amount of rage."

Post time beckons, bringing a rambunctious owner to the track bar and his sedate filly to the saddling ring. There, Cherry Kiss's silks – burgundy and French blue - excite much admiration. Cherry Kiss does not. Her odds are as long as the losing faces at the \$50 windows. Brittain shortens them slightly with a bet from the heart, then gathers himself up and positively sprints to the grandstand. Could be they saddled the wrong competitor. Brittain does nothing by the book. A director who makes films principally or television, he owes his emotional allegiance to words, to still photographs and to radio: "I can sit and stare at still pictures for hours. And I'd been

enormously influenced by CBC Radio in its heyday in the late forties. It was a special laid-back style, a lot of ironies, a type of wit I'd never heard. I really feel that in a sense everything went backwards. If I had my druthers, you'd start with super wide- screen motion pictures and then you'd freeze the frame and have radio and stills."

Consequently, a typical Brittain film is both predictable and surprising, leaning heavily on narration (delivered in his smoky growl) but keeping us off balance through an ongoing interplay between the artfully written script and the carefully selected image: "What I try to do is to move at a level away from what you're seeing on the screen, and leave something with the audience that isn't literally there. That's maybe why I use words so much."

That's certainly why his works seem so comfortable on the essentially narrative medium of the small screen. Yet, for Brittain, the snug fit is more coincidence than calculation: "I don't consciously do things for television, in terms of obeying some rules that some ass has laid down. TV for me is largely noise, so I try to come in even louder or real soft. Some way to change the conventional sound that comes out of there."

This assault on convention continues next weekend when the CBC will show his expanded version of *The Champions*, a three-part analysis of the titanic struggles between Pierre Trudeau and Rene Levesque. (The completed third chapter - entitled *The Final Battle* - has also made its way into this year's Festival of Festivals lineup.) But these days, he's preoccupied with another film on another feisty Canuck - Mackenzie King. Although the corporate brass have already committed themselves to an airdate in the spring, Brittain is a notorious procrastinator who becomes a driven perfectionist only in the "white heat" of the deadline. So he labors fitfully over "a half-ass draft" of the script, certain of little more than his overriding intention: "King is intriguing to me because he was the embodiment of this country. He had a sense of how to hold Canada together, but it had nothing to do with higher principle."

That rage again, just a hint, flashing out from behind the tired eyes. But where does it come from, this socialist anger, this righteous wrath that crowds out the royalist and beats up the jock? He ponders, the sun streaming through his Westmount window, until the shadows lengthen and the child becomes father to the man. He's a boy of 12 again, proving once more that the most sublime of motives can grow from the most mundane of roots:

"There was one thing that happened to me that had quite an effect. I was a mild middle-class kid, and they switched the school borders on me when I was in Grade 5 or 6. That meant I was thrown in with a bunch of really poor kids, and they used to take turns beating me up. Then I started to sort of enjoy the fact that I was an underdog, and to get to know these kids. At first, I was incredibly embarrassed. I mean, we had a maid and they had no shoes. But there was just an empathy with a part of the world that was really sad, and hopeless."

Shod hooves flying out of the gate, dreaded Motor City visions dancing in her head, Cherry Kiss takes an early lead and holds it straight to the finish. On this summer afternoon, at least, hopelessness triumphs by a length and a half. In the winner's circle, she looks relieved, and he looks ecstatic - like a boy of 12.

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DONALD BRITTAIN: THE FILMMAKER by Ronald Blumer

"Sure he liked fame, but that isn't why he did what he did. He was truly driven to make great films -- the only way he could be happy was to make the best films he could make. There was no alternative possible." Adam Symansky, producer

"It is going to be a lonely country without Donald Brittain. He held a mirror up to us and helped us understand ourselves. He could have done it nicely and safely but when young filmmakers look at his wonderful legacy they will understand that Brittain always took the way of greatest risk" Sean McCann, actor

"We are the only nation whose national symbol is a policeman. I fear that Canadians have an obsession with security. Our artists' imaginations are dulled, exploring the unknown is too much work, and we settle into the gentle pursuit of mediocrity. I'm told we are the most heavily insured people on earth. We should never forget that when all things are secure, no man is safe." Donald Brittain

Producer Adam Symansky worked closely with Donald Brittain during the last five years of his life. "In trying to understand Brittain, you are trying to understand how a poet works," Symansky says. "He was someone who, with a few brush strokes, was able to capture some essence of the human condition. You see the finished films and it looks so simple, but I saw the struggle; I know how hard he worked. I'd leave the cutting room at three in the morning and I'd come back the next day and he'd still be hunched over the typewriter surrounded by a pile of crumpled-up paper. He would have written only two lines and he would rewrite those two lines several times and rework them even as he was recording the final narration."

Brittain wasn't always so hard-working. Indeed, in his early days at the Film Board, he barely managed to hold onto his job. Brittain came to the NFB in 1954 after a brief career as a newspaper reporter, and he did not adapt easily to his new profession. "I spent a few years writing scripts which everyone seemed to hate," he later recalled. "No films ever got made. I kept hearing that they were going to fire me, so I kept a low profile. There was this place where you were sent before they fired you, corridor 'W' in back of the third floor. The smell of death hung over me when I was informed that my office was being moved there. Seventy-five bucks a week, and I knew my days were numbered."

In fact, Brittain's filmmaking career was just beginning. He was working in the NFB's sponsor unit, which made utilitarian films commissioned by government departments and the occasional corporation. The Film Board trained novices at the sponsor unit, and, according to Brittain, the films he made there were pretty bad "church basement stuff, but the sponsor liked them, so I was saved."

Brittain's first real break came in 1960, when he was given the job of figuring out what to do with several million feet of World War II footage sitting in the Film Board vaults. He turned it into CANADA AT WAR (1962), an impressive 13-part television series. This led to an

assignment to produce a film on the most unpromising of subjects--Canadian war graves abroad. It was a project which nobody at the Film Board had wanted to touch, but Brittain transformed it into a film that everyone wished they had made. In *FIELDS OF SACRIFICE* (1963), with its brilliant editing and tough, yet compassionate narration, Brittain had at last discovered his voice.

Film Board producer and author Bill Weintraub paid tribute to that voice after Brittain's death: "How the man could write ... The cadence, the drone, the rasp, the music, the words...the way he could find that word, that precisely right word, the word that would stab, that would chill, that would glow in the dark.

Brittain followed *FIELDS OF SACRIFICE* with his first wave of brilliant films, beginning with *BETHUNE* (1964) and including such early classics as *MEMORANDUM* (1964) and *NEVER A BACKWARD STEP* (1965). During the mid-1970s Brittain began a second wave of masterpieces that left the critics breathless. Beginning with *VOLCANO* (1976), a film about the author Malcolm Lowry, and culminating in *PAPERLAND* (1979), his irreverent look at life among the bureaucrats, he also astounded audiences. His subjects ranged from baseball to Henry Ford II. He made 'people' films and 'idea' films, 'pretty picture' films and 'interview' films. But they all had his particular stamp, a quality which film critic Rick Groen has described as "a communion of words and pictures that is simultaneously detached yet passionate, ironic yet involved." Groen, like all critics attempting to describe Brittain's unique style, seems to become similarly tongue-tied in a mass of conflicting adjectives.

For Brittain himself, the challenge was simply "to make documentary as entertaining as Cary Grant." "I have a strong desire to make documentaries as entertainment," he explained. "To do this, I always try to stay one step ahead of the audience -- to surprise them and to lead them in a direction and then turn a corner on them which is unexpected, and have them enjoy the surprise. Yet will all the twists and turns you have to stay true to the subject. Above all avoid being predictable. This is a tough thing to avoid in a documentary; it's a tough thing to avoid in anything. The moment the audience can predict what's coming next you're a dead duck." No matter how exalted the subject matter, Brittain was always fond of saying that he pitched his films to the guys in the back of the tavern. His aim was "to move them emotionally, reach them in the gut."

As Adam Symansky observes, "He was really good at figuring out what people would want to know. What did they really want to know about Mackenzie King or Hal Banks or Bethune? Not the philosophical or political issues, but what they ate for breakfast and what they discussed with their wives--what kind of gum they chewed. Don't read the comics, he loved sports; he never felt above his audience. Just because he was making 'art' didn't mean that he forgot the People Magazine, the gossip part of the story." The question for Brittain was always how you transform the gossip into something that illuminates the soul of a person.

Brittain's strongest works -- and indeed the vast majority of his films -- were biographical. Using both documentary and dramatic techniques, he painted moving portraits of such diverse subjects as Lord Thomson of Fleet, Tommy Douglas, René Lévesque, Pierre Trudeau, Hal Banks, and Malcolm Lowry.

Brittain's career blossomed at the time of a great revolution in the development of documentary film. Until the 1960s, documentaries had been cumbersome to shoot. The huge cameras, lights and sound trucks needed had meant that documentaries had to be pre-scripted like feature films, but in the sixties, hand-held cameras and portable sound recording equipment suddenly made it possible to go out and catch bits of reality on the run. "With the light-weight cameras and the fast film stock all the rules went out the window, Brittain later commented," "We were really shooting from the hip. There was a real sense of freedom." The problem became what to do with all that freedom and the thousands of feet of 'reality' once you got it back to the cutting room.

With a sixth sense for structure, and the "golden hinge" of his narration, Brittain had the answer. He realized that unleashing the power of this new medium required a whole new attitude towards the filmmaking process -- a flexibility that was the exact reverse of the old, pre-scripted approach, an openness to the unpredictable. "Making a documentary is like big game hunting," he said. "You go out with a great cameraman and soundman to capture something and bring it back. You don't control it -- you surround it. A lot of guys go rigid; they say, 'I'm the director, I'm in charge and I'm going to overpower the material.' That's a terrible mistake. When you are out there shooting, you are collecting raw material and that's all."

He described the documentary crew as "a small band of adventurers thrown together in a desperate enterprise, totally reliant on each other for survival and charged with the job of bringing something back alive and thus hopefully illuminate some corner of the human spirit. Filmmaking, unlike writing and other solitary forms, is a gregarious pursuit; the heat of the moment welds men and women together into a creative unit. When it's over, you don't forget each other. At night you spin tales of old campaigns. It is something that grown-ups have difficulty understanding."

Brittain's co-workers felt this bond very strongly. Ted Remerowski, who worked with Brittain as an editor, describes how "he made you feel like a co-conspirator." Doug Keifer, one of Brittain's favorite cameramen, recalls that Brittain "always made you part of the filmmaking process. Donald was the orchestra conductor -- he was unquestionably the leader and set the direction of the filming -- but he was confident enough to turn to you during a shoot and say, 'I just don't know what to do next. I probably did the best work of my life with him.'"

Once the shooting was completed, a Donald Brittain film was forged during long days and tortured nights in the editing room. "Being in a cutting room with Don was like being on a voyage of discovery," according to Marrin Canell, a producer who worked extensively with Brittain.

Anyone familiar with the art and craft of documentary filmmaking knows that finding a structure in raw material is always the most difficult part of the process. Here Brittain showed a true genius. In an interview with Cinema Canada, Brittain described the difficult process of editing the Holocaust documentary MEMORANDUM (1965). "I don't know how many times we put that thing together. At one stage it was too predictable, at another it was too confusing. Certain things which laid an egg at the beginning of the film became wonderful at the end. We had cut

ninety-two sequences which were never used in the final film. Nine months in the editing room and I never thought the thing would work." According to Canell, Brittain's struggle was largely "because he never went for the obvious. "He never had preconceived notions of how the film should be structured-that's what always amazed me. The final form never came easily, it was always a struggle. Most filmmakers put together a film using a paste-up of the transcripts. He always listened and watched the footage to see not only what the subjects said, but how they said it. He let the material work on him, choosing the shots on the basis of his emotional reaction -- always looking for the little moments that exposed the characters and their idiosyncrasies." In these days and weeks searching the footage he would find the golden moments beyond the words -- the looks, pauses and the gestures that reveals some inner truth.

Despite the long and numbing editing process, Brittain had an uncanny ability to remain fresh to new ideas. He would project the various rough versions to invited audiences and closely watch their reactions to see what was working and what was not. He would fight for endless hours trying to make a shot or a sequence work, but if it did not, he would throw it away without regret. When Les Rose was a young filmmaker in the basement of the Film Board, he watched Brittain's activity in the neighbouring cutting room with awe. "I'd edit a sequence and it would be fat-too much material. Brittain chops to the bone. When he gets finished with a sequence, there is practically blood dripping off the editing machine.@

And always the 'bone' for Brittain was the story -- the glimpse into the soul. Like a novelist he was always in search of the insight into what made the human animal tick.

Robert Duncan worked as a researcher and writer on some of Brittain's biographical films. He recalls, "We consumed our subjects and they consumed us. Through Brittain I learned that it was not enough just to say that a person was born and he went to school. You had to explain that it had been a long labour and a difficult birth and tell how he was feeling on that first day of school. It was the little golden nuggets of information that Brittain loved and made us love."

Brittain's first biographical film was about the Canadian doctor and crusader Norman Bethune. "I was so totally involved that I thought I knew the guy personally," Brittain said in a magazine interview. "For a whole year I sweated blood to put it together. I started out as a Bethune hero-worshipper and gradually got to the point where I really disliked the man intensely. Finally came the long process of trying to round him out. I remember the day it was finished. I walked home and stayed under the covers for twenty-four hours; my nerves were shot. Then we screened the film for Bethune's friends, many of whom were alive and kicking --some of whom had slept with him. That was the great moment for me: they liked the film.

"In 1968, at the height of his career, Don Brittain quit his secure National Film Board staff job for the precarious life of a freelancer. "I am essentially a very lazy person," he later explained. "I got into a situation at the Film Board where I could spend all my time at committee meetings, and it's easier to sit on a committee than to make a film. It is very different being hired gun -- greed is a great spur to my creativity." In the next ten years, Brittain built a freelance career. Most of his films were still made for the Film Board, but many were also joint projects with the CBC. It was a unique position, and it enabled Brittain to play on the strengths of both organizations -- the creative freedom of the Film Board and the huge audience of the television

network.

In the mid-seventies Brittain also tried working for Hollywood, but he quickly came to hate the place. "I don't think the man was capable of compromise," explains actor Sean McCann, "He could compromise with time, he could compromise with budget, but he couldn't compromise with content." But compromise was essential to working in Hollywood, and as Brittain said later, the experience taught him how much freedom he needed: "Essentially, I'm not interested in big budgets unless I've got some control. The more money I have, the less elbow room I've got. In big-budget films the money men come in to watch the dailies and start objecting to somebody blinking an eye in shot 27b, take 4. Hell, I'd rather go back to the newspaper business.

"Within the year, Brittain gave up on Hollywood and began again to make a stream of award-winning Canadian films. With his own projects and those he produced for others, he often worked on several films a year. But Brittain had always feared becoming stale, and the more films he made, the stronger that fear became. By the early 1980s, despite continuing success, he confessed to a close friend that he felt his creative life had come to an end. "I've had a good kick at the can," he said, "maybe it's time I threw in the towel." But instead of quitting, Brittain changed direction and gave himself a new set of challenges mixing the reality of documentary with the emotional power of dramatic films. He had attempted drama now and then throughout his career, directing scripts written by other people, but he had never really felt in control. Not surprisingly then, his first real success in drama documentary was with a film he both wrote and directed, CANADA'S SWEETHEART: THE SAGA OF HAL C. BANKS (1985). The film tells the true story of the union-busting thug Hal Banks. In CANADA'S SWEETHEART, critic Rick Groen wrote, Brittain finally "banished the hyphen from the 'docu-drama', perhaps the world's first certifiable cold fusion of those warring elements." The form of the film was a unique Brittain creation -- a narrated drama. His working methods were equally unconventional.

"The casting sessions were very bizarre," according to the film's producer, Adam Symansky. "He would talk more than the actor. You would sit there while Don, in excruciating detail, would tell the actor the whole sub-text and who this person was and so on. Some of them really got into it, but most of them just wanted some lines to read. He would finally hand the guy a page with a few dozen words. There was never any attempt to make him act. That was forbidden. It was not the orthodox way, but somehow he came out of it with a feeling of whether this guy would work or not."

All of the stylistic details which normally obsess dramatic directors bored him to tears. He never used to bother himself with details of set design or costume or camera angles. What he did care about was getting a good performance out of the actors. While filming, he never watched the cameraman, he watched the actors -- watched and listened intently to each word and its inflection. That's where he gave his strongest direction. And if they felt they hadn't got it right, he would always give them another chance to do it better."

Actor Sean McCann worked in CANADA'S SWEETHEART and THE KING CHRONICLE. He remembers Brittain as the director who "would never let you get set in your ways. He would always be pushing you off guard, doing things like handing you a speech five minutes before

filming. I couldn't possibly prepare and as a consequence I would be reaching-stretching. I would be uncomfortable but after the film was finished, I couldn't wait to, work with him again."

Brittain's working methods meant that chaos always seemed to engulf his dramatic productions. For starters, there never seemed to be a final shooting script. During filming, with crew, lights, actors and extras waiting, you would see Brittain off in a corner of the set, furiously writing the next page of dialogue.

"He would always want to let ideas ferment as long as he possibly could," according to Symansky. "He needed all the subtext to work with-the feeling of the society, of the times, what other people felt-as much surrounding material as possible: the books people were reading at that time or the fact the Red Sox had lost the Pennant. He loved the context in which things happened and he would build out of that context the truth of a particular moment or a particular person. His technique was to immerse himself in the material so that it would always be running through his head. That's why he waited until the last minute to write things down."

When the shooting was finished, Brittain approached his dramatic material in much the same way that he did his documentaries. He treated the footage he had shot simply as raw material -- blocks to be moved, and re-moved, during a long and arduous editing process. Editing completed, he would narrate the drama, using the unseen voice to provide the emphasis and the links to unite often disparate scenes. The net result was neither drama nor documentary, but a hybrid which combined the emotional involvement of fiction with the realism and immediacy of a documentary. It was a new art form which belonged only to him.

For his associates, making films with Donald Brittain was both nerve-wracking and exhilarating. Adam Symansky once compared the process to "going out with him on a trapeze without a net. You just had to keep reminding yourself that he had never dropped you before." Nothing ever seemed to gel until the film was finished, and it was never finished until the last possible second. For Brittain, the creative process was long and messy, but the films were the pay-off; each one a breakthrough, a sign that he had pushed back his boundaries a little more. It was a 35-year, 100-film battle, and he never did get stale. Perhaps he stayed fresh because he always took the most risky path, says producer Bill Weintraub, "It was part of his inability to settle for the obvious. He seemed incapable of doing anything in an ordinary way."

Brittain believed film was a great medium for storytelling, and he was the greatest of storytellers. On location, he was a superb interviewer, and in the editing room, a magician with structure. His dramas are bold experiments on uncharted seas; his documentaries, models of cinematic art. In the end, however, we will continue to watch his films because they offer us insights into ourselves, into other people and into the human condition. Detached yet passionate, ironic yet involved, throughout his long and varied career Brittain found endless fascination in the foibles of the human animal. Perhaps the quote from Sophocles which Brittain used to begin VOLCANO sums up his own philosophy: "Wonders are many, and none is more wonderful than man."

THE FILMS

Fields of Sacrifice 1963

38 Minutes

FIELDS OF SACRIFICE was Brittain's first masterpiece. Unlike his later films, which mix stock footage, cinéma vérité sequences and interviews, this early film succeeds using only images and Brittain's poetic narration.

Commissioned by the Department of Veterans Affairs, *FIELDS OF SACRIFICE* was to have been typical of the sponsored films that were the bread and butter of the Film Board. The Department had wanted a travelogue of the war graves of Canadians who died abroad in the service of their country, a film to show Canadians that the graves were being well tended. Brittain took this most unpromising of subjects and transformed into an essay on the meaning of war, memory and sacrifice.

The film combines violent war footage from the past with the somber present of the graves, the insane brutality of the killing with the eerie normality of present-day life. As in all of Brittain's films, the narration in *FIELDS OF SACRIFICE* does not describe what is being shown, but rather puts the images in context and heightens their impact. Here, Brittain collapses the past and present in a brilliant poetic counterpoint. In black and white, for example, we see a young soldier curled up dead on a beach in France, and then we cut to a colour image of the same beach with a modern-day sunbather curled up in the same position. These two images appear over the narration that we shall never forget the sacrifice of these soldiers. In the combination comes the ironic truth.

Throughout his career, Brittain used narration freely and unabashedly for all of his documentaries and even many of his dramas. "Since they went to the trouble of inventing the talkies," he once said, "I figured I might as well make some noise." In Brittain's later work, narration delivered in the smokey growl of his own voice became a trademark, but in this early film, his commentary is read by the actor Douglas Rain. In all of his films, Brittain's words are, in the truest sense, a revelation. They magically link disparate images and ideas. They are simple and direct, yet at the same time surprising and disturbing. Critics have talked about their "scorpion sting." Just as the audience is getting comfortable, Brittain hits them with something so strong that it wakes them up. Even on the printed page, the narration retains much of its power -- the wit of conversation and the density of poetry. When a Donald Brittain film has faded from the screen, it remains a lasting pleasure to listen to the writing.

Narration from *Fields of Sacrifice*

The reins of Italy speak of them.
The poppies of Flanders stand for them.
They still echo across Vimy Ridge.

The flatlands of the Dutch can hear them.
They are the ghosts on the shores of France.
They haunt the sea off Normandy.
They have left their scars on the soil of Picardy.
They are remembered by the sand.
They live in the minds of old men who still travel the roads of the Somme.
They are the dead-the Canadian dead of the two World Wars - one hundred thousand of them.
They died in far places: places which still live and remember.

Hong Kong had seen them as fresh, unblooded troops.
Then they heard: "the hills had got them."
Canadians, exhausted by the hills, attacked in the hills B
killed in the beautiful hills of Hong Kong...
Places of defeat; places where they never stood a chance.
Buried with full honours, head to head, in the German style.

.....

Memories over the gentle green heart of England.
Memories in the searing brown heart of Sicily.
Canadians moved through this cruel and alien land once, in a burning July.

The old people remember, for they had been starving and they were fed.
And they heard stirring sounds of strange music.
And they will tell the children.
An episode to be passed down, now part of the Sicilian legend of death, a part of the ancient land
of blood.

The old man was watching them that morning.
Have a cup of coffee, his mother had called to them.
We did not know Canada was in the war.

They would never know such days again -- these towns of Picardy.
They made her famous with the song she never understood the words, but she laughed along
with them. For they would soon be dead.

.....

The Canadian Memorials at Le Quesnel and Bourlong Wood.
The block of Canadian granite at Jury and Sanctuary Wood.

Passchendaele, where men choked to death on mud.
Courcelles, where men first saw the tank.
Saint Julien, where men first felt poison gas.

Time passes. Monuments and men grow mellow and there are no longer friends and enemies.
But only victims.

Bethune 1963
59 minutes

BETHUNE is Brittain's first biographical film, and one of his greatest. Like *FIELDS OF SACRIFICE*, it seemed like an impossible film to make. Norman Bethune died in China in 1940, leaving behind only letters, photographs, a scrap of movie film and a few friends and enemies in Canada. In China, he was carved into marble as a hero of the revolution; in Canada, until Brittain's film, few people had ever heard of him. It would be hard enough to make a written biography of such a man, but Brittain's task was much harder. Nevertheless, Brittain made from these sparse elements a vivid portrait of this long-dead crusader; somehow, viewers of the film come to feel they know Bethune.

At the heart of the film are Bethune's own words -- his letters to close friends read voice over by the actor Michael Caine. They give us insights into the workings of his inner soul. Interviews with his wonderfully articulate associates and lovers add juicy tidbits such as the fact that, "Bethune thought he could smell a redhead." In the end, Brittain created a heroic character in the mold of Hemingway's fictional giants. Restless and passionate, articulate and rebellious, Brittain's Bethune charged at life full-tilt, taking life's pleasures with immense gusto and, with equal intensity, fought to alleviate human suffering. But the film also makes Bethune a real person -- haughty, selfish, authoritarian, yet impatient with authority, idealistic, hard drinking, womanizing -- often a thoroughly unpleasant human being. All this, and at the same time a hero.

Brittain was fond of telling the story of how the making of this, one of the NFB's greatest films, was not officially approved by the Board. Even when completed, the head of the NFB tried to block its U.S. release. "In the end," Brittain said gleefully, "we knew that the Film Board had to back down because it was too embarrassing that Canadians couldn't export their heroes because the Americans objected to the fact that Bethune belonged to the Communist Party." In spite of the controversy, the film was an enormous success both in Canada and the United States. For the first time, Brittain got a taste of making films for a large audience. "It showed me the impact of film. If we had written the thing for Maclean's magazine it wouldn't have had one-tenth of the audience. When it ran on television, I saw the power of the medium and found it a bit scary. The responsibility became real -- these were things that could affect a great number of people."

Excerpts from Bethune

Bethune: My father was an Evangelist, and I come of a race of men violent, unstable, of passionate convictions and wrong-headedness, intolerant, yet with it all, a vision of truth and a drive to carry them on, even though it leads to their own destruction.

Narration: 1926-Bethune has tuberculosis but his sense of fun never leaves him. He predicts his date of death and decides to go out laughing. There follow mad, irreverent days and nights -- parties with nurses, neighbours and fellow patients. And all this despite the fact that, not only are they in the midst of a TB sanatorium, they are in the midst of prohibition.

Interview: With Dr. John Branwell. He considered himself a great judge of the bootlegged whisky that might be brought to us. He considered that it was not a fit whiskey unless it could be drunk like milk; and he prided himself that he remembered the taste of both -- good whiskey and milk.

Narration: There is a rich man's tuberculosis and a poor man's tuberculosis. The rich man recovers, and the poor man dies. This succinctly expresses the close embrace of economics and pathology.

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Bethune: (From a letter from Spain during the civil war.)

We were heavily bombed today, about 12 noon. Standing in a doorway, as these huge machines flew slowly overhead, each one heavily loaded with bombs, I glanced up and down the street. A hush fell over the city -- it was a hunted animal crouched down in the grass, quiet and apprehensive. There is no escape so be still. Then, in the dead silence of the street, the songs of birds came startling clear in the bright winter air.

If the building you happen to be in is hit, you will be killed or wounded. If it is not hit, you will not be killed or wounded. One place is really as good as another. After the bombs fall -- and you can see them falling like great black pears -- there is a thunderous roar. From heaps of huddled clothes on the cobblestones, blood begins to flow -- these were once live women and children.

After the planes had passed, I picked up in my arms three dead children from the pavement where they had been standing in a great queue waiting for a cupful of preserved milk and a handful of dry bread. One's body felt as heavy as the dead themselves, but empty and hollow, and in one's brain burned a bright flame of hate.

I can't write you, my friends, as I should like to write you because my words are poor, anemic and hobbling things. "Uncomfortable?" -- Good God!..."Killed?" -- for these poor huddled bodies of rags and blood, lying in such strange shapes, face down on the cobblestones, or with sightless eyes upturned to a cruel and indifferent sky. "Lovely?" -- when the sun falls on our numbed faces like a benediction.

So you see, it's no good.

.....

Bethune: (From a letter from China.)

Books? Are books still written? Is music still being played? Do you dance, drink beer, look at pictures? What do sheets in a soft bed feel like? Do women still love to be loved? Flora, I wish we had a radio and a hamburger sandwich...

Memorandum
1965 58 minutes

One of very early films made about the Holocaust, MEMORANDUM still speaks to us today. In it, Brittain does not preach, he does not try to shock or moralize. In an almost bewildered voice, he merely asks how it could have happened. Or more specifically, how ordinary people could have allowed it to happen. As with *FIELDS OF SACRIFICE*, MEMORANDUM is a haunting contrast of past with present -- putting memory hard up against what is happening now. When it was released, this film was not only a powerful statement but also a superb technical achievement. It was Brittain's first film to use the new portable camera techniques successfully. The *cinéma vérité* part of the film covers the voyage of a survivor of Bergen-Belsen, Bernard Laufer, as he returns to show the camp to his teenage son. Brittain's genius was to take this event and link it to an extraordinary series of inquiries. His aim was to make the events of the genocide comprehensible, to attempt to fit them in some understandable human experience. As the film unfolds, we watch Laufer as he tries to convey to his son the enormity of the Holocaust. Instead, he and the audience are confronted with a contented and affluent Germany. Banality is mixed with evil, the ordinary with the unthinkable. Life goes on; even the death camp has become a pleasant green park. "Nobody knows," murmurs Laufer near the end, shaking his head. "Nobody knows," echoes the narration.

The deeper message of MEMORANDUM is summarized by the contemporary German playwright Peter Weiss, who at the time was producing a play about the concentration camps. His play, he notes; "is dedicated to the notion that once a crime has been committed it becomes a potentiality for all time." In the end the film works most powerfully as a reminder -- a memorandum.

Narration from Memorandum

Early one morning in Munich in the summer of 1965. In a few days, Fraulein Mara Bellett will be celebrating her twenty-fourth birthday. She was born in 1941 -- the year that Hitler decided, among other things -- that she should never see a Jew. But that's finished now, and there's enough to do, getting ready for the day ahead.

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In Dachau, for the first time, doctors were able to conduct what they called 'terminal' experiments such as this gradual withdrawal of oxygen. Dachau opened in 1933. But the world had seen concentration camps before. In 1936, Hitler really opened the eyes of the world. There had never been super-highways like his autobahns.

Then one night in 1938, Jewish property across Germany was demolished. Many Germans were

embarrassed. One told a Life Magazine reporter, "Don't look," he said, "this isn't the real Germany..." Then Hitler announced that war would bring the annihilation of the European Jew. It was assumed that this was a figure of speech.

And that very day in 1965, some of the men responsible are on trial in Frankfurt. Here they come now: seventeen of them, late of the Auschwitz administration. Some killed with gas and needle and club. And some with the pointing of a finger. Maltke, the adjutant, who kept track of things, and then went into the export trade. Capesius, the druggist, who helped in eight thousand murders, but said he was always polite. Papa Kaduk, who sat in his chapel, and admitted he occasionally had to pull himself together. Doctor Klehr, who punctured hearts with a needle, and Bednarek, who interrupted torture for prayer, and Wilhelm Boger, who beat men's testicles until they died.

Boger, Kuduk and four others get the maximum sentence -- life at hard labour. Most of the rest get lighter terms. Three are acquitted, for it is murder which must be proved. Shobert, the Gestapo representative: "I killed no one personally," he tells the court, and they let him go.

They rejoin the German crowd. And who will ever know who murdered by memorandum, who did the filing and the typing from nine o'clock to five, with an hour off for lunch.

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And if it could happen in the fairyland of Hansel and Gretel, and the Pied Piper of Hamelin, could it not happen anywhere?

And could it not happen anywhere, if it could happen in the cultured land of Bach, Beethoven and Schiller?

And how could it happen in a land of churches? There were some martyrs, it's true -- but where were the other servants of Christ?

And where were the scholars of Heidelberg? They were with the captains of industry and among the first to play along.

And how could it all have started in the happy land of Bavaria? In this, the Hofbrau House of Munich, Adolph Hitler first laid out his program to the world. But why should that darken the festive summer night? A third of them are tourists, a third were too young and the other third is sick and tired of the whole business.

An old German says, we are a cursed generation. Not just us but some of you too. We will take out horrible place in history. Can you just let us quietly live out our time? There is really nothing anyone can do.

Ladies and Gentleman... Mr. Leonard Cohen
1965 44 minutes

Films, and particularly documentaries, exist very much in the time they are made. We look at the World War Two documentaries with their thundering, driving, proselytizing narration as curious artifacts of a different era both in terms the events they are depicting and in the cinematic style used to convey these events.

Ladies and Gentleman, Mr. Leonard Cohen was filmed in 1964 when its subject was known as an avant-guard poet but before his musical career made him world famous. But as fascinating as the subject of the film is the technique that Brittain used to capture the spirit of this quirky, self-reflective poet. Up until this point, in most documentaries, the presence of the camera, the director behind the camera and even the narrator were treated as invisible observers of the action and the subject. Brittain, very brilliantly breaks the mold in this film and the documentary becomes an interplay between the subject, the camera and the filmmaker. While very common in the many personal films made since the early 1960s, this technique was revolutionary at the time. And as usual with Brittain films, it was not technique which he used for technique sake, but as a device to reach a deeper truth about Leonard Cohen, self-described as both a con-man and a searcher of deeper truths. AHis wonderfully oblique way of looking at things,@ Brittain said, Ainspired us to bring a new dimension to documentaries.@

For this film Brittain became part of the Cohen=s scene which now, with turtle neck shirts and new age ideas looks very quaint. He appeared in the film and bantered with the characters and got them relaxed and ready to open up to the camera. But there is something deeper in all this because Brittain -- although far from a new ager -- sensed in this new world something that he genuinely connected with -- an end to the stuffiness phony sanctimony of the 1950s and a refreshing sense of irony about the world around them.

Near the end of the film, we see Brittain sitting beside Cohen in a theatre at the National Film Board, screening footage from the film. Cohen remarks that it a very privileged thing to see yourself sleeping but then adds that, of course, he was faking for the camera and that he was not really sleeping. Brittain comments, AIts a very privileged thing to see yourself pretend to sleep.@ Cohen immediately picks up on this, AYes... That=s a privilege of a higher and more esoteric order.@ He then continues his dialogue with Brittain about how the film reveals a truth but it is also extremely artificial, a big con.

Cohen and Brittain are giving us a very entertaining lesson in the cinematic Heisenberg principal -- the fact that the very act of observing a subject changes the nature of the subject. Cohen remarks that seeing himself on film is changing his whole concept of Awhat style of man@ he was. Brittain playing the games says, AThis may affect your whole life.@ AI hope it affects my whole life.@ answers Cohen. And who knows, maybe it did.

excerpt from Ladies and Gentlemen, Leonard Cohen

Leonard Cohen's voice over images of him walking alone in the streets of Montreal: "I would like to remind the management that the drinks are watered and the hat check girl has syphilis and the band is composed of former SS monsters. However, since it is New Year's Eve and I have lip cancer, I will place my paper hat on my concussion and dance."

Never a Backward Step
1966 57 minutes

With this portrait of Canadian newspaper baron Lord Thomson of Fleet, Brittain perfected his biographical story-telling technique. Television biography, particularly of famous people, is often predictable, superficial and, in the end, curiously unrevealing. A Brittain portrait is the opposite. It gives you the dates and the main points, but it also lets you in on those telling details missing from official portraits -- the great stories, the twitches and mannerisms, the inconsistencies and gossip that in the end reveal the essence of the subject.

Much of the success of this technique involved getting access to his subject, being allowed into those private moments. When dealing with public figures, this could be very difficult. Brittain tells the story of how he wooed Thomson. He concocted a letter which I sent to him saying, >all the great men of history had sat for their portraits. The portrait painters of the 20th century were documentary filmmakers and the greatest documentary filmmakers of the 20th century happen to be at the National Film Board and we are interested in doing his portrait.= We got a telex back the same day.@

Lord Thomson was a small-town businessman from Northern Ontario who ended up owning more newspapers than any other man in the world. His empire included radio and television stations and a few publishing houses. Brittain got his permission to follow him around for a few days. During this time, we see the many sides of Roy Thomson -- from the empire-building businessman to the visitor in a grade school classroom instructing the kids to mind their sums. Throughout the movie, Brittain plays on the irony of this small-minded, small-town, awkward man socializing with prime ministers and stars. We watch him being fitted out with his robes for the House of Lords, for example, worrying about whether they will be able to be shortened for future use by his son.

We see him scribbling numbers on bits of paper and compulsively scratching them out. We hear the story of this multi-millionaire happily taking advantage of a free bus trip to Northern Ireland and disappearing in the afternoon to buy another paper for his empire B The Belfast Telegraph.

These little moments add up to an appreciation of this strange man. He is not a bad person, although you know he can be ruthless; he is sometimes foolish, although certainly no fool; he is at once pompous and genuinely humble. In the end, Brittain managed to capture on film a very ordinary Canadian, who through luck and dogged hard work became one of the most powerful men in the world.

Excerpts from Never A Backward Step

Narration: His 35,000 employees include some of the finest journalists in the world. Yet he describes news as "the stuff you put between the ads," and a television license as "a license to print money."

.....

Interview: (With a British reporter.) There is a curious succession of waves of Canadian bruisers who come over to, the British Press -- you know Lord Beaverbrook and that lot -- and because we're so badly set up and because we don't know what we're protecting anyway, they can go -- phut -- through it just like that. Then a funny little thing happens: the British fall over backwards and thank them very much for it: There is a funny kind of way in which we like the colonial to, come in and be tough and beat up our press for us. If an Englishman did it, they'd call it vulgar.

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Narration: Thomson bought his first newspaper, The Timmins Press, in 1934. It is still making money for him in Northern Ontario.

Narration: The son of a Toronto barber, he headed north in 1928. He wanted to sell radios, but there wasn't a station; so he started one. The North Bay merchants bought up air time...and Thomson began to build a string of small-town enterprises. Soon he was saying that the sweetest music in the world was the sound of a spot commercial at ten bucks a whack.

.....

Interview: (With Albert MacKay, a newspaper editor in Scotland whom Thomson had fired.) Well, it was handled pleasantly, but it was still a shock. I am sure that as far as Roy Thomson was concerned, it was as pulling your teeth is to many a dentist -- it was an entirely painless extraction; but it wasn't painless to me. My wife had prepared for my lunch that day, a haggis. She still had it in the pot when I came home for lunch. When I told her, the shock was so big that the haggis never came out of the pot. So I've always said that last Saturday was the day our haggis died.

.....

Narration: Thomson's wife died in 1951 and he lives alone. But in a deeper sense, he has always been alone. As a boy, he was half blind and ungainly. As a man, he has locked himself up in his work. If, as some say, he is incomplete and one-dimensional, he is certainly not in the least unhappy. He enjoys the company of successful men, but even in a crowd, he is essentially alone.

The Dionne Quintuplets
1978 87 minutes
CBC/NFB Co-production.

This film tells the story of the Canada=s first modern media super-stars and how the fabric of their lives was destroyed by the media. The world=s first surviving quintuplets were born in a small town in Ontario in the middle of the Depression. They were quickly dubbed miracle babies. Immediately surrounded by the newly invented sound news cameras, as well as radio and newspaper reporters, the whole world wanted to see them and their lives became a full fledged media circus.

The government quickly intervened to protect the babies -- protect them from germs, their parents, their siblings and indeed the much of the outside world. As babies and young children they were placed in a specially built hospital known as >Quintland= with a viewing window and a steady stream of hundreds of thousands of tourists. Not surprisingly, growing up in this totally isolated artificial and sterilized world, they were poorly equipped to deal with the real world and their adult lives were lonely and tragic.

This film is another example of how Brittain=s films differ from television journalism. The raw material consists of the standard interviews and newsreel footage but Brittain mines this material to go below the surface to find its emotional and dramatic center. Near the end of the movie we see a publicity film shot during World War Two in which the girls are paraded before the cameras to sell war bonds. Being French Canadian, they are also useful to the government to help heal the growing rift between the between Québec and the rest of the country over conscription. These children, who had been exploited from the moment of their birth to sell everything from toothpaste to soap, are instructed to sing the song, AThere will Always Be an England.@ They do what they are told but with great sadness. Watching this scene, which Brittain allows to run uncut, will break your heart.

In Brittain=s body of work, this film stands out as an oddity because Brittain was not allowed to write the narration. The film is was a co-production between Brittain and another celebrated Canadian writer, Pierre Berton and was based on his book, The Dionne Years. By contract, Brittain would produce and direct the documentary but Berton would write the narration. AWe were not Gilbert and Sullivan,@ said Brittain ruefully, AMy greatest strength was writing and this had been taken away from me.@ (1)

The other member of the team, the real unsung hero of the production, was Barbara Sears, the brilliant researcher who dug up much of the stock footage used in the film and located the people who were principals in the story and could supply riveting first-hand accounts.

Both Brittain and Berton were men used to calling the shots and this their only collaboration was highly fraught especially after Brittain insisted that Berton do a major re-write of the narration.

A We started going through the film painstakingly, foot by foot discussing the interplay between word and image. @ Brittain said later. A The tension eased quickly. Berton was a real professional. @ (2) The result of this collaboration is a extraordinary and tragic story told with a searing emotional intensity that makes it almost painful to watch.

(footnotes (1)&(2): Donald Brittain - Man of Film, by Brian Nolan, PUB. Digiwire 2004)

Excerpts from The Dionne Quintuplets:

Narration: Why? Why did they come? Partly for escape, partly because it was the thing to do in those years, but also because in a decade of war and economic misery, these five little girls represented a genuine miracle. The wonder of life, the miracle of survival.

Interview (with men from the town where the Quints grew up): Right here near the entrance gate there was a large wooden box filled with stones, they called them paternity stones. People would pick them up and take them home with them.

Narration: Nothing illustrates the quintuplet-mania better than the phenomenon of these fertility stones.

Interview: Well we used to go down to highway 17 and pick up stones every night -- it was overtime -- we used to go two, three men, pick up a load of stones and bring them back here and the next night we had to go back to get some more because they were all gone.

Interview: They'd even ship bagsful of them over to New York and different states. I don't know what they done with them there.

Interview: So that word got around and people wrote letters asking us to send them these marvelous pebbles. Oh, they had wilder propositions than that, like a request for the stud services of Mr. Dionne...

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Interview with a Toronto newspaper reporter, Phyllis Griffiths:

I was invited to visit the big house and meet the quints but I didn't have much chance to ask them anything at all because they were asking me (all the questions) What was it like in Toronto? What do girls wear? Did they go out on dates alone? At what age? All this sort of thing... You know, I was a little past the teenage years myself at that point but I had a general knowledge of things. These questions went on for at least a half an hour.

Oh yes... They felt terribly isolated from the world.

Volcano. An Inquiry into the Life and Death of Malcolm Lowry
1976 99 minutes

Whereas films like BETHUNE, NEVER A BACKWARD STEP and LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, LEONARD COHEN present wonderfully complex portraits of their subjects, VOLCANO takes film biography one step further. This 99-minute impressionistic rumination on the life of the alcoholic author Malcolm Lowry is nothing less than an X-ray of a man's soul. In form, it is neither documentary nor drama, but an extraordinary hybrid -- a new type of filmmaking invented by Brittain to tell this story. VOLCANO is his masterpiece."

Brittain always made sure that the people who worked with him got as involved with the subject as he did," says Volcano's producer, Robert Duncan. "We worked for several years on the film; and during that time there was not one day when we didn't talk about Malcolm Lowry. We quoted him to, each other, drew parallels between our lives, looked for omens and talked to, the dead man as if he was still with us. Lowry became our daily bread, but it was Brittain who was the baker."

Malcolm Lowry was one of the great literary geniuses of our age, but he wrote only one book worth reading. It took him eight years to do it, and the process destroyed him. Alf he had written it in a blinding flash, a moment of inspiration I wouldn't have been interested.@ Brittain said later. A Lowry was just a talented, very weak drunk and there are an awful lot of talented, very weak drunks in the world so the chances were that he could never get the book out. I looked at his eight years of writing, re-writing and getting rejected and I said to myself, here was a very great, courageous man.@

Haunted by homosexuality, guilt and paranoia, Lowry's life was a downward spiral of impotence, alcoholism and, ultimately, insanity. The film tells this story in two ways: from the inside, through Lowry's own tortured words, read voice-over by the actor Richard Burton, and from the outside, through interviews with friends and family who helplessly watched his self-destruction.

The interviews are remarkable. There is Lowry's brother, who pours out years of pent-up frustration over living with this irresponsible and embarrassing family legend. There is Lowry's psychiatrist, who describes the treatment he gave Lowry to cure him of alcoholism -- a program which bordered on torture. Then there is a school chum, now an old man, who remembers Lowry as someone who could fart at will. Finally, there is Lowry's long, suffering wife, who describes the sad details of their poisoned, blessed life together.

Lowry's novel, UNDER THE VOLCANO, is set in Cuernavaca, Mexico during the Day of the Dead. The films grotesque footage of present-day Mexico echoes the words of Lowry's book, giving them the words new and strange power. Brittain does not use literal footage to illustrate the words -- instead we see Lowry's "Mexico of the heart" in the ineradicable images of a nightmare.

VOLCANO was a very special film for Brittain. As if to underline his affinity for his subject, near the beginning of the film we see the startling image of Brittain, himself, emptying a bottle of beer over Lowry's grave. "I am a member of the great brotherhood of alcohol," Brittain said to an interviewer after the film's release. "People used to say that I was bent on the same sort of thing and maybe for a while I was. I was caught up in the romanticization of self-destruction, but I managed to survive, and he didn't. In this film, I have tried to get inside the head of a man who is supersensitive, who is beset by many demons. I've tried to look out at the world from his point of view. He was a man of genius and of incredible weakness. But because he was a man of weakness, he was a man of great courage. He poured himself into this one great book and obtained salvation through his work. But I think he knew when he had finished his book, he had finished himself."

Excerpts from Volcano

Narration: On the Day of the Dead, November 2, 1936, Mr. and Mrs. Malcolm Lowry arrived in Mexico. Lowry was 27 years of age. His passport described him as a writer, but he considered his only book an embarrassment. His life, in fact, was an embarrassment.

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[His wife] Jan Gabriel was not spending too much time with Malcolm Lowry. She was sure that she had married a genius but that genius seemed largely bent on self-destruction. At any rate, they settled in a small house on the Calle Humbolt...Here he began to write a book he called UNDER THE VOLCANO. Gradually a creature that Lowry called simply the Consul began to emerge. Miraculously, for he was still drinking as heavily as ever and his marriage was in shreds, Lowry began to write as he had never written before. Perhaps this was his last hope -- the justification and redemption of his largely worthless life, for the Consul who drinks mescal down to the worm is not a creature of fiction at all, but Malcolm Lowry himself.

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Reading (From UNDER THE VOLCANO): Oozing alcohol from every pore, the Consul stood at the open door of the salon Ophelia. How sensible to have had a mescal, how sensible.

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Narration: Lowry was writing about a defrocked British diplomat in the final stages of alcoholic disintegration. He was also writing, sometimes with good humour, about Hell.

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Reading: But look here, hang it all, it is not altogether darkness. You misunderstand me if you think it is altogether darkness I see... But, if you look at that sunlight there then perhaps you'll get the answer. See, look-look at the way it falls through the window. What beauty can compare to

that of the cantina in the early morning. Not even the gates of Heaven opening wide to receive me could fill me with such celestial, complicated and hopeless joy as the iron screen that rolls up with a crash! ...All mystery, all hopes, all disappointment, yes all disaster is there beyond those swinging doors.

Henry Ford's America
1976 57 minutes

Made in the same year as the brooding, somber VOLCANO, HENRY FORD's AMERICA is light, wry and highly entertaining. Brittain's assignment was to make a film illustrating the impact of the automobile on society. The film does this admirably, but not as a sociological thesis. "When I undertook the project," said Brittain, "I realized that there had been thousands of films made about the automobile. So I decided to personalize my film by looking at one man who stood at the center of the car industry."

The person is Henry Ford II, heir and absolute dictator of the Ford empire. Interviewed by Brittain, Ford tells a revealing story about trying to break through the picket lines during a strike at his grandfather's factory by roaring up the Rouge River in a speedboat. "I thought it'd be kind of fun, you know B I was young and I didn't give a damn."

The film paints a vivid picture of the combat zone this former playboy created in his upper management. We get a glimpse of Lee Iacocca, then a Ford Vice-President and creator of the Mustang, who tells us he likes men with fire in their belly.

Brittain prophetically notes that the Ford Motor Company has the highest executive mortality rate in the industry. Soon after this film was made, and without explanation, Henry Ford II abruptly fired Iacocca, the most successful of his young executives.

Ford's grandfather was equally ruthless, but he was the man who turned the toy of the rich into a birthright of the American masses. Much of the film examines, with amused fascination, the enormous hold that Ford's creation has had on the public. There is the preacher of the drive-in church, for example, who finds the car an excellent space in which to contemplate the hereafter; there is the customizer who regards it as a medium for artistic expression; and there are people like Mandy Pearson for whom the car is life itself. We learn that she earns \$100 a week and spends \$40 on gasoline. She describes how someone once backed into her beloved Mustang and she sat sobbing in the back of the police car, "'Cause it hurt my car and it hurt me at the same time."

HENRY FORD'S AMERICA is a truly fun film, a realization of Brittain's ambition to make documentaries as entertaining as a Cary Grant film. Brittain plays the car culture for all it is worth, and at the same time he views its excesses with ironic amusement. Because of this invention, he reminds us, more people have been slaughtered on the road than in all of America's wars. But then, he impishly adds, an equal number have probably been conceived in its back seat.

Narration from Henry Ford's America

Two million Americans have died in it. Although comparative figures are not readily available,

it's estimated that about the same number have been conceived in it. It is therefore fair to say that it brings out the best and the worst in man.

The age of the automobile has been dated from 1926 when it was first reported that Americans had more cars than bathtubs. But then, you can't go to town in a bathtub.

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On the 12th floor of world headquarters, Henry Ford II had a president and 45 assorted vice-presidents... It is not easy to reach the 12th floor, and the stay can be depressingly short. There is a file on each of a thousand executives. On each man's file, it is said, there are the names of three men who could replace him. Each executive is colour-coded. They can be green, blue, yellow or red. A red will soon be out of work, a green is a man with a future.

The Ford Motor Company has another distinction. There's no Mr. General Motors, there's not even a Mr. Chrysler anymore, but there is a Mr. Ford. His occasional fondness for strong drink and his difficulties with wives and traffic cops has created some confusion in the minds of laymen as to whether or not he actually goes to work. There is no such confusion in the House of Ford. He is the last of the great dynastic chiefs. Each man is here at his pleasure...

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Once upon a time design meetings were unnecessary. Old Henry the First offered a single model, and if you wanted any colour but black, you had to paint it yourself. When Henry the Second was born in 1917, his grandfather had just finished trying to stop the First World War. It was the only thing that he tried that hadn't worked...He introduced the moving assembly line, which cut the cost dramatically, and the toy of the European rich became the birthright of the American masses. It was cheap, durable and easy to fix. Precisely right for a restless migrant population trying to fill up a huge, undeveloped continent. Henry Ford had made America free to move.

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Down through the generations, it has indeed been the teenager who has best understood the deeper meanings of the motoring age. For they were the first to realize the possibilities of the rumble seat and to discover the irresistible mating call of the motoring horn. A cornerstone of American moralityBthe difficulty of finding a suitable place for misconductBhad been forever blown away. Here at last was a private place that could be moved at will to quiet country lanes. Even the moon could be maneuvered into place and with a little ingenuity and suppleness of limb all things at last were possible.

To some men a place to meet with God. To others an instrument of the devil. A simple machine that seems to defy description. But whatever it is, Henry Ford plans to keep on making it until such time as America decides on some other form of civilization.

Paperland. The Bureaucrat Observed

1979 58 minutes

Brittain loved the National Film Board for the support and freedom it gave him, but he often watched with horror as it aimlessly spun its bureaucratic wheels, turning previously creative filmmakers into paper pushers. He called this film his "office boy's revenge," for all the trouble bureaucrats had given him through his career. And I enjoyed every moment of it!@ A risk-taker throughout his life, Brittain despised those who opted for the comfortable collectivity of large organizations. He himself left the Board at the peak of his success and remained a freelancer for the rest of his career.

PAPERLAND is unusual because it is an 'idea' film, a film not with a particular person but with an idea -- bureaucracy -- as its focus. Although a film with a serious message, in form it remains light, quirky and surprising.

The film takes the viewer around the world -- to Ottawa of course, but also to a Caribbean island of only 230 people, home of the world's smallest bureaucracy; to the Vatican, the world's oldest bureaucracy; and to then Communist Hungary, to show how the absurdities of the bureaucracy can flourish under every political system. The idea may be abstract, but Brittain still revels in the human particulars.

PAPERLAND shows us pensioners in Hungary pleading with government officials to get the elevator in their building working; moving day at Statistics Canada when civil servants rise up in arms against the loss of their office doors; a Government of Canada official taxidermist, who is not permitted to stuff a bear until its papers are in order; the solitary bureaucrat on a tiny Caribbean island who literally wears different hats to carry out his multiple functions as postmaster, tax collector and census taker; and an anonymous papal functionary who adds his comments to a memo dated 1643.

This film is an example of Brittain's ability to bring a complex subject down to earth. The countless small examples build until we begin to realize the essential irrationality of a system that can take intelligent individuals and cause them to commit collective absurdities. All this is reinforced by the bite of his incredible narration. AWhere the goals (of a bureaucracy) are simple, such as putting a man on the moon, or transporting Jews to gas ovens, it works with relentless efficiency...@

Brittain himself was not unaware of the irony of biting the bureaucratic hand that paid his filmmaking bills. "I guess I'm considered a double-crosser," he said in an interview after the film's stormy release. "I'm considered part of the establishment who is airing dirty linen in public and not playing the game. But what the hell, if you're going to play the game, you're finished.

Narration from Paperland

Here he comes now, trying to act like a normal human being. But he is the most despised of human creatures. His activities have brought down upon his shoulders the scorn and outrage of history's multitudes. He is 'homo bureaucratis', the bureaucrat, and he lives in the land of paper.

He has been compared to the cockroach. Like the cockroach, he appears to have no useful function. Like the cockroach, he has many enemies. Like the cockroach, he has survived all attempts at extermination.

Bureaucrats were first seen standing by the canal builders of ancient Egypt, filling out the forms. Behind each stonemason in the Great Wall of China stood a bureaucrat with a requisition. The more complex the undertaking, the greater the need for paper work, and thus, in the monumental confusion of the twentieth century, we have finally come to the golden age of bureaucracy.

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The castle of Loudon, in the Vienna Woods, has a typical history. It failed as a castle. It failed as a hotel. But it flourishes as a finishing school for bureaucrats. And how will these young bureaucrats be ultimately judged? They will not be judged on whether or not they have promoted truth over falsehood, love over hate, joy over despair. They will be judged solely on whether or not they have followed the proper procedure.

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The bureaucrat lives in an unnatural state. To do his job properly he should rid himself of passion, initiative and common sense. What remains, according to one sociologist, is the truncated remnant of a human being.

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Newly elected heads of state invariably promise that they will cut the civil service. Pierre Elliott Trudeau, on becoming Prime Minister of Canada, vowed that he would reduce the civil service by 25,000 jobs. Now, as he whiles away his last hours after 11 years of power, he may notice that he is surrounded by 40,000 more bureaucrats than when he came to office. He may also notice that they are still working, while he has lost his job.

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A public bureaucracy is filled with good intentions and boundless energy. Where its goals are simple, such as putting a man on the moon, or transporting Jews to gas ovens, it works with relentless efficiency. But where the goals are complex and contradictory, it begins to move in never-ending aimless circles. Perhaps we should be grateful for this confusion. The only thing that saves us from bureaucratic subjugation is the inertia of the bureaucracy itself.

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In the end, we, the people, and they, the bureaucrats, at least share in one common feeling C complete helplessness. Here in a basement in Budapest, the circle is complete. Retired public servants, after a lifetime of administering the rides, come to a special place for help through their own last bits of red tape.

On some not-too-distant day, we will perhaps all be gathered around one glorious table, attending the ultimate meeting, a sort of `committee of all mankind', having long since forgotten what the meeting was all about.

ON GUARD FOR THEE. 1981

PART ONE: THE MOST DANGEROUS SPY 56 minutes

PART TWO: BLANKET OF ICE 56 minutes

PART THREE SHADOWS OF A HORSEMAN 56 minutes

It is both chilling and eye opening to view this 1981 production in the light of the events of recent years. This is Brittain's attack on the R.C.M.P. as a agency unaccountable to politicians or the law -- a bumbling, and highly secretive agency. For years it engaged in secret break-ins, illegal wiretapping, and sent out teams dedicated to infiltrating every organization that they saw as even mildly subversive.

The series begins with one of the opening salvos of the cold war. It may surprise some Canadians to learn that it happened in sleepy post-war Ottawa with the uncovering of spy ring in the Russian Embassy in 1946. Brittain concludes that it set off an anti-communist witch hunt fanned by a growing hysteria in the United States. Some people in Canada were sent to prison for legitimate reasons but many more had their careers quietly destroyed with secret blacklists often based on rumour or faulty intelligence. Even members of Parliament were not immune. The Mounties opened up a file on him because, in their words, Ahe was involved in grass root politics.@

The cold war permitted the expansion of what Brittain characterizes as a secret parallel government with the R.C.M.P accountable to no one but itself.

This story is masterfully told using re-creations, stock footage and actual players. Behind the story is Brittain's outrage. He saw these events and the setting up of a Canadian secret service as a cover to scare the populous with a largely mythical enemy and under the cover of a fictitious national crisis to steal people's liberty with secret incarcerations, character assassination and biased trials. All this with the complicity of the government.

The film includes this extra-ordinary statement from Prime Minister Trudeau during a press conference:

"The policy of this government and that of the previous governments is that the politicians ... should be kept in ignorance of the day-to-day operations of the police and security forces. This is not the view which is held by all democracies, but it is our view and it is one we stand by...the (minister of justice) should not have the right to know what the police are looking at and who they are looking for and the way in which they are doing it.@

Brittain may have had hopes that this three-part documentary which included many personal stories would be a wake-up call to Canadians that their civil rights were under attack but he also

had no illusions about the passivity of his countrymen who eager to believe that their leaders and the nation=s policemen are to be trusted. As he says in the narration at the conclusion of the series, APerhaps Canadians are a people who will never realize that, when all things are secure, no man is safe.@

The series is an excellent history lesson but in light of the corruptions and incompetence which has been exposed at the higher levels of the R.C.M.P. in recent years and the new boogie man established to replace the USSR in the form of the so-called War on Terror, this series is as relevant today as the nightly news. That is because, as in many of his films, Brittain reaches for the universal truth that power is not to be trusted and we should always fight injustice under whatever form of cover it may take. This is what separates his films from journalism. This is what makes them startlingly timeless.

Narration from On Guard for Thee

Canada has always been unique in its choice of symbols, no proud lion, soaring eagle or growling bear for Canada. First there was the beaver, chosen because he was easy to trap and skin, and now Canada was the only nation in recorded history to have a policeman as its symbol. The Mountie had become installed as the embodiment of the Canadian soul and when he appeared, the nation applauded.

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The flower children of the sixties have departed. The 1970s begin and there is a sharp new smell of menace in the air. Hijackings, kidnappings, assassinations. A new age of terrorism, grotesque and unpredictable acts committed by strange and desperate fanatics...For the first time in their long history, The Royal Canadian Mounted Police are accused of a less than perfect performance.

The R.C.M.P. had been around for a hundred years and until now they could do no wrong. For the first half century, they had brought the law and order of the whiteman to the Canadian Northwest, or as an old Indian said, Athey kept up peaceful while our rights were being stripped away.@

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In the forests of Central Europe during the Cold War, it was always midnight. Never in the history of human espionage has there been such a concentration of treachery... A thousand hidden cameras clicked away recording military movements by day and the sexual appetites of unfortunate diplomats by night.

Some lives were very short, and some deaths were very long -- bodies without fingernails,

tongues or testicles were delivered in various ways, each one a little message to some person who would understand.

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Fred Gibson [then new head of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service] has access to files on one out of every twenty adult Canadians. For a nation notably lacking in subversives, this was impressive. It was said some of the files would be destroyed but how was anyone to know. There was talk of watchdog committees, but watchdogs had a way of being absorbed by security agencies. But whatever route Fred Gibson decided to take would probably be acceptable to Canada.

The Mounted Police were riding away but perhaps the true north strong and free would forever be in the shadows of the horseman. Perhaps those shadows were but a reflection of a darker side of the Canadian spirit. Perhaps Canadians were a people who would never recognize that when all things are secure, no man is safe.

The Champions

1978 & 1986 Part I: 57 minutes Part II: 56 minutes Part III: 87 minutes

Brittain was once asked why he slaved so hard over his films. "It's my life," he answered: "this is what I'm going to leave behind. You pick timeless subjects and treat them properly, and people are going to be looking at them two hundred years from now. We are stockpiling history. The portraits of the twentieth century are documentary films. Instead of looking at faces hanging in a gallery somewhere, you're going to be watching a movie about them."

Throughout his long career, in one way or another, Brittain was always painting a portrait of Canada. In this series, he finally discovered a way of dealing with issues which go to the very core of Canada's survival. He found his story in the curiously interlocking careers of Pierre Elliott Trudeau and René Lévesque, a tale of two ideologues filled with fire and passion and very different views of the destiny of the nation.

The raw material for THE CHAMPIONS was the stuff we have all seen before -- the news reports, the interviews and the stock footage. Brittain's genius, in this mammoth three-and-a-half-hour compilation, was to fit all the pieces together -- not only to make sense of it all but to produce "a drama as taut as the best fictional political thriller," according to a critic from Variety. If anyone wanted to give an outsider a crash course on Canada," the reviewer added, "these films would suffice in explaining all about the complexities and eccentricities of the two solitudes."

"From time immemorial the champion of a cause, its defender on the final battleground was its fiercest and most noble warrior." So begins Brittain's narration, and as the films unfold, we begin to understand the men beneath the warriors' armour and, through them, our own history. Adam Symansky, who produced THE CHAMPIONS: THE FINAL BATTLE, explains that "Brittain was never interested in the mechanics of what was going on -- the Referendum -- that was sheer drudgery for him -- the Constitution, oh God! What he was interested in was what was going on in their hearts while these other things were going on." One of the he uses in THE CHAMPIONS to reveals this interior drama is to use outtakes captured by the cameras before and after the politicians were officially 'on', the looks and glances in inner musings which reveal everything.

Brittain is describing a great political passion play, a time of strong personalities and deeply felt principles. Looking at the personalities and passions of leaders today, it seems by comparison that, in Trudeau's parlance, the pipsqueaks are running the world. For many viewers, seeing these films in the 21st century will be an exercise in nostalgic. Where in the Canadian political landscape, in this homogenized era of the bland and blow-dried, are today's champions?

The dry words of Brittain's citation for the Order of Canada pay tribute to his "masrful visual records of our social and cultural past." THE CHAMPIONS is such a record, and the film that will outlive its protagonists.

Narration from The Champions Part I: Unlikely Warriors

Lévesque lived in a remote little town on the Gaspé coast. Although New Carlisle was largely English and the English had most of the money, this fact did not leave any permanent scars on René Lévesque. He himself will tell you that he had a very good time. The French and the English called each other names, punched each other out and then played together in the snow.

Trudeau spent eight years at Brebeuf College: It was run by the Jesuits and it was dedicated to the fine tuning of the human mind. It was a world of logic and reason, uncluttered by the passions and emotions of the world outside.

Narration from Part II: Trappings Of Power

Pierre Trudeau was Canada's third bachelor Prime Minister but neither Mackenzie King or R.B. Bennett ever went out with girls like Barbara Streisand. He was the first Prime Minister of Canada who was more famous than the Prime Minister of England.

If he was the most intelligent Prime Minister since Arthur Meighen, he was also the most removed and solitary. Isolated by a computer and a small palace guard, access to the seat of power was limited to that handful of senior civil servants, the legendary mandarins of Ottawa.

In 1972, he called an election, announced that the land was strong, and declined to campaign. His Cartesian logic and Socratic dialogues did not go down well in a Drummondville cafeteria. He offered Québec little, but enough of them voted for him to save him from political oblivion. He was more in his element with the great men and issues of the time. Here he could realize his dream of Canada moving with stature through the international community. Lévesque had called him a citizen, not of Québec, or of Canada, but of the world.

Narration from Part III: The Final Battle

November 15th, 1976...Lévesque's astounding victory must have been the dark moment in Pierre Trudeau's political life. By achieving power, the cause of separation had taken a quantum leap. The movement was now credible. It had a momentum and Lévesque had in his possession the awesome weapons of office.

In the aftermath of the election, the Royal 22nd Regiment stood firm at the Citadel, but a lot of other people didn't know if they were coming or going. They set tables in New York to listen to Lévesque, who claimed he was George Washington. Then Trudeau came to the States and claimed he was Abraham Lincoln. The Americans were confused.

Neither man entered politics until he was in middle life, but such is their impact that they seem to have been around for ever. Neither man sought power, but it came to them. It is not really a

battle between the emotional and the rational man; both minds are brilliant, both souls are passionate and there is a fine rage in each. Both are glad that, at last, it has come to this time of confrontation. They are, in a sense, prisoners of each other and this will be their final battle.

Canada=s Sweetheart. The Saga of Hal C. Banks

1985 115 minutes

CANADA'S SWEETHEART is the story of Hal Banks, a gangster imported into Canada to crush the Communist-controlled Canadian Seamen's Union. With guns, baseball bats and government complicity, Banks succeeded in bringing a more compliant union to the Great Lakes. In the process, he destroyed the careers of over six thousand seamen. This powerful story, based on court transcripts, is told through dramatic recreation intercut with startling documentary interviews with actual victims of Banks 20-year reign of terror.

This marriage of documentary realism with dramatic recreations is called reality television today, but in one way or another, Brittain had been experimenting with this hybrid art form since the beginning of his career. As he himself pointed out, "any difference between documentary, docu-drama and drama doesn't have much significance. Documentaries also manipulate material." In CANADA'S SWEETHEART, Brittain combines the strengths of both forms of filmmaking. As critic Rick Groen said, "for once the devices of fiction serve to clarify-not distort-the din of fact."

Brittain had directed for the CBC before making CANADA'S SWEETHEART, and had experimented with simple recreations in the NFB/CBC series ON GUARD FOR THEE (1981). But this film was Brittain's first major success with drama. CANADA'S SWEETHEART was a success partly because it tells a good story with a strong central character and Maury Chaykin's depiction of Hal Banks as a muscle-bound sleaze is very convincing. But in this film Brittain also perfected his technique of 'narrated drama'. The narration is the glue that tells some of the story and links the dramatic scenes. Interspersed are documentary interviews -- some with Hal Bank=s victims -- that jolt the viewer out of the drama and back to the realization that this is not a piece of fantasy -- that the blood and the suffering is real.

Brittain never treated film as a platform from which to spout his ideologies, but in this film he reveals some of his own convictions. In conversation, Brittain frequently raged against that peculiar brand of Canadian smugness which hides its hypocrisy behind the banner of "peace, order, and good government." Apart from Hal Banks, the real villain in CANADA'S SWEETHEART is the Canadian government, which imported Banks, quietly condoned his brutality and then, for 25 years, protected him from prosecution. In among the cracked heads and punctured kidneys of the victims, the film features a grinning, real-life ex-Cabinet Minister, Jack Pickersgill, stroking his poodle while waffling his thin excuses. Touches like this makes the story both grotesque and very real.

Excerpts from Canada's Sweetheart Narration:

Because of him, men once feared to walk the streets. A judge once called him a 'Frankenstein monster', a fellow union leader called him a psychopathic brute. And yet, when he got himself in

trouble, cabinet ministers rushed to his defense. One minister said it was rather fun having out own gangster. He was Hal C. Banks, and in the 1950s he was as famous as Barbara Ann Scott.

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Interview: With Jimmy Todd, an elected S. I. U. union leader who fought Banks' absolute ride. (He tells the story of when some of Bank=s goons appeared at the door of his house.)

Todd: I think that in their mind they were told I was living alone at the time because my wife had just returned from Scotland where we had to send her to keep her out of trouble at the beginning. And I suppose they didn't realize that she was there. So I started to get into a little argument, and at that point the wife Agnes came out of the kitchen and says...

Agnes Todd: I had just put Patricia in her high chair. I didn't want her to get underneath their feet so I harnessed her in her high chair... So I lifted a pot of hot fat off the stove and went in and I said, "Are your friends staying for supper, Jim?" And he said, "They're no friends of mine." And I said, "Well in that case they'll be leaving." Actually it was a Friday night and we always have fish and French fries on Friday nights so it was a convenient time. Oh yes, they left almost immediately. It was good and hot...

Narration: Dick Greaves had also decided to take his chances. He had been double-crossed. Banks had made a move to take over Greaves's union. On the East Coast the marine engineers had been raided by Banks...

Greaves: We were doing some work in the afternoon and there was a knock at the door. They said, "We came to give you something," and they caught me in the temple.

Brittain: If somebody is coming after you, you always put your back to the wall-is that what you try to do, you try to land on your back?

Greaves: Back, right! Or land on your back because, you know, if they kick you, they're going to kick your kidneys in. If they kick you in the ribs, well that's one thing. It's sort of hollow and bouncy, but if they get a good real solid kick into your kidneys, well, it'll dislodge the damn things inside and you'll probably have real trouble all the rest of your life.

.....

Re-creation: Bank's hearing at the Norris Commission:

Charles Dubin, lawyer for the Commission: Are you saying to me that the people who came to this commission and said they were beaten up had not been beaten up?

Hal Banks: I would say that some of them weren't. And I would say that some of them were psychopaths, and I would put them in that category with respect to the question as to who beat them up.

Dubin: We know and we have the evidence of a Captain Bissette, Who has been an employee of Upper Lakes for many years...

Banks: I don't know what the hell they were...bar room brawls or what they were...

Dubin: He was beaten up at a department store.

Banks: I have seen captains beat up and I have seen captains beat people up several times in my career on the waterfront. There could be a hundred reasons for it. I have seen captains running out of an apartment house with an irate husband at their necks etcetera, I don't see how the S.I.U. could have been involved in this. You are misinformed and you are wrong.

.....

Justice Norris: Harold C. Banks is capable, decisive, egocentric, intolerant and ruthless. He is of the stuff of the Capones and the Hoffas. He is a bully -- cruel, dishonest, greedy, power-hungry and contemptuous of the law... In this generally law-abiding country, where we boast of our culture and our freedom, decent citizens were afraid to walk the streets and afraid to take the stand in support of their rights. Witnesses came to give evidence still bearing the marks of beating. Some were crippled or marked for life.

And what are we to say of those who supported and protected him here and in the United States? Respected businessmen, labour leaders and above all politicians. They have no such justifying circumstances in their upbringing and yet they aided and abetted him at every turn, and thus share in the responsibility for his crimes

The King Chronicle

1987 Part 1: 100 minutes

Part 2: 105 minutes

Part 3: 103 minutes

Brittain loved challenges. "It is no fun to win," he once told a colleague, "unless you're coming from behind." In this six-hour portrait of William Lyon Mackenzie King, Brittain had perhaps found his greatest challenge. On a technical level alone, it was a major feat. Brittain tells a story that began in the nineteenth century and ended in the middle of the twentieth. Cars, fashions, military uniforms and interior decor had to be accurate if the drama was to work. Added to this were dozens of complex locations and a 90-member cast, all to be assembled on a shoestring budget. The final achievement is all the more remarkable when we realize this was the first major drama in which Brittain did not rely on documentary intervention. There are no interviews with real characters; the film is written from beginning to end.

The greatest challenge, however, was presented by the film's subject. "Making films about Bethune and Trudeau was a lot easier," Brittain acknowledged. "They are up-front, macho stuff. Mackenzie King is the antithesis of confrontation and drama. He waffled, appeased, compromised and deliberately bored people to death. Any drama there is was inside."

Mackenzie King was a subject who almost imposed himself on Brittain. Like most Canadians, Brittain had never liked the man. Growing up in Ottawa, he had looked on him as a national embarrassment sitting beside the Churchills and the Roosevelts of the world. But since Brittain had made so many movies about recent Canadian history, King was an unavoidable presence. There he was lurking in the background of the CANADA AT WAR series, and of the Gouzenko spy case in ON GUARD FOR THEE. In fact, through almost 50 years of history, according to Brittain, he was always there, "the embodiment of many of the contradictions that underlie the querulous nature of what it is to be Canadian." In the film Brittain quotes historian Bruce Hutchison: "If we don't understand King, we don't understand ourselves."

"It is, of course, the darker side of ourselves," Brittain explained, "the embodiment of that unsavory element in this country, a wildly exaggerated need for security and respectability. King, in his hypocrisy, always gave Canadians the easy way out. He was the great conciliator, a leader in constant search of the path of least resistance. He never challenged us as a nation."

In making the film, the trick was to make the great conciliator into a character able to hold an audience for six hours. It would have been easy to take cheap shots; to paint King, with his adored mother, his sainted dogs and his crystal ball, as a sanctimonious fool. Instead, Brittain took his subject seriously and probed behind the bland public image. His major weapon was King's own twelve million word personal diary. King, the most secretive of men, used his diary as an alter ego, and into it he poured all of his rationalizations, his vanity and his musings about the supernatural. The diary gives the film its historical validity and it provides that window which Brittain always searched for, the window into the inner life of his subject.

Did Brittain succeed in nailing down King as he had done with Bethune and Trudeau? "In the end I had trouble drawing conclusions," Brittain was finally to admit. "In the end, all I could do was to let the audience come in as a private secretary to Mackenzie King and be privy to all the things in the back corner. Let them draw their own conclusions." In fact, people who had known and had worked with King were startled by the realism of Brittain's portrait. He succeeded in capturing, if not explaining, this enigmatic Canadian to a large television audience.

The Globe and Mail summed up the film and its anti-hero this way: "In Brittain's talented hands, King becomes an eccentric tea cozy of a man, a fussy old asexual nutcake who seems to trip pigeon-toed through history like a dear maiden aunt. His renowned political acuity and ruthlessness become clear only in the turn of events, comprehensible because of Brittain's orderly and entertaining narration. Somehow, **THE KING CHRONICLE** is a triumph in spite of its subject."

Narration from The King Chronicles

From Part I: Mackenzie King and the Unseen Hand

A creature who cast no shadow, though he ruled the land of the midnight sun.

A summer's day in Ottawa, 1909. A time to discuss the new trophy Lord Grey is donating for football, or the heartwarming success of a new book, *Anne of Green Gables*; a moment of relaxation for the two men who will dominate the Dominion of Canada for half a century. The one with the white hair is Sir Wilfrid Laurier, a fine figure of a man. The fatter person is Mr. Mackenzie King, who is often compared to a toad. When their statues are built, Sir Wilfrid's will stand noble in the sunlight. Mr. King, on the other hand, will stand in perpetual gloom beside a parking lot.

Narration from Part II: Mackenzie King and the Great Beyond

Franklin Roosevelt gave men hope and did everything he could to give them jobs. When he spoke of a rendezvous with destiny, he inspired a generation. In Canada there was silence. Eight hundred thousand Canadians had no jobs; thousands more had no homes. Capitalism had failed. Nature itself had failed. The wheat fields had blown away. The Prairie farmers are dust and called out to heaven for bread.

Mackenzie King seemed to have been born for this moment. Here was a trained economist. Here was the man who had once written that industry must have a human heart, that government must be the guardian of the oppressed. But when he was needed most, he proved to be an unctuous fraud. He didn't know what the Depression was all about. And he didn't seem to care. He wandered fussily through his phoney ruins. It was a good place for him. His mind was encrusted with nineteenth century platitudes, his compassion confined to friends and acquaintances. He was very kind to dogs.

Narration from Part III: Mackenzie King and the Zombie Army

If Mackenzie King had his way, the Second World War would never have happened. Goodness knows, he'd done everything to avoid it. Mr. King was a master of appeasement -- a handmaiden of Neville Chamberlain. Peace at any cost. It was not that he was a pacifist or had a morbid fear of Hitler. He was afraid of what Canadians might do to each other. Since he had first taken office, he had been busy trying to keep Canada from coming apart at the seams. The French Catholic Church and much of Quebec favoured the Fascists; much of Ontario would ride into the valley of death for the British. Then there was the Ku Klux Klan, a Communist Party, a Nazi Party, funny money in Alberta and Socialists in Saskatchewan. All the elements of the great dominion rattled around in Mackenzie King, which might account both for his chronic indigestion and his political invincibility.